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Our view: Protesters, there's no right to be violent

Times Editorial Board

The First Amendment — especially freedom of speech — makes up the foundation of this great nation. Witness everything from this very Opinion Page and Web site to your freedom to go out and create your very own Opinion Page and Web site.

However, nowhere in the First Amendment is there a right to instill violence, vandalism and certainly not harm to others in expressing your views.

And that's why it's deeply troubling and disappointing to read the latest developments about some protesters and self-described anarchists at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul.

While the vast majority of the thousands of protesters in St. Paul deserve respect and praise for expressing their rights in civil and law-abiding ways, those few who plan, prompt and partake in violence and vandalism must be held accountable.

The Star Tribune and St. Paul Pioneer Press reported Wednesday about a search warrant and affidavit provided by the Ramsey County Sheriff's Department and signed by Ramsey County District Judge Joanne Smith that depicts an anarchist group called RNC Welcoming Committee as having extensive plans to disrupt and even do violence during the convention.

Granted, the court documents should not be viewed as proof. They are really only the starting point for the justice system to perform its role.

The court documents were the basis for police raids Friday and Saturday at four Twin Cities locations, all suspected of having anarchist ties. Seven people were arrested. News reports about the court documents detailed:

Discussion of kidnapping delegates, beating police officers, sabotaging the Xcel Energy Center, blocking bridges and intersections and even "capturing federal buildings."

The group's main goal was to "crash" the convention (something even promoted on its Web site) and it contacted similar groups in almost 70 cities to recruit members and raise money.

Members communicated by e-mail, held meetings and conducted an "action camp" a month before the convention.

Discussions included people talking about ways to hide Molotov cocktails, bricks and shields, and use devices that stop vehicles.

Also discussed was throwing marbles under the horses of mounted police, using liquid sprayers filled with urine or chemicals, and using violent tactics to help free people who were arrested.

Information for the court document came from informants and undercover officers.

Clearly, the individuals arrested in the raids deserve their day in court. Thankfully, the very visible convention presence of groups such as the ACLU and the Minnesota Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild should help them to that end.

Still, the documents paint a very unsettling picture — and one that clearly crosses the line between expressing freedom of speech and inspiring criminal behavior. We embrace the former and support stringent consequences against the latter.
